The Betrayal of Honorable Dissent: German Scientists after World War II

John Wear


Werner Heisenberg

The end of World War II brought a crisis in Germany that is rarely mentioned in the history books. The Allied denazification program and extreme economic deprivations in Germany aroused bitterness among leading German scientists. Even vehemently anti-Nazi German scientists came to realize that the Allied occupation was a system of repression no better than what they had experienced under the National Socialist regime. This article will focus primarily on the reactions after the war of three of Germany's greatest scientists: Max von Laue, Otto Hahn, and Werner Heisenberg.

Max von Laue

German Nobel-laureate physicist Max von Laue earned an international reputation for being courageously anti-Nazi. In a speech at an annual Physicists Conference on September 18, 1933, von Laue unmistakably implied a comparison of the Nazi government's attitude toward Einstein and relativity theory with the attitude of the Inquisition toward Galileo. When Jewish chemist Fritz Haber died in January 1934, von Laue published a tribute to his former colleague in two widely read and prestigious scientific journals. Von Laue's speech and obituaries resulted in reprimands from the Prussian Ministry of Education.[1]

Other similar actions made von Laue an international symbol for refusal to cooperate with the Nazis. Von Laue indicated after the war that he stayed in Germany for a number of reasons, one of which was not to pre-empt badly needed positions abroad from exiled Jewish physicists. However, his primary reason for staying in Germany was "I wanted also to be there once the collapse of the 'Third Reich'—which I always foresaw and hoped for—allowed the possibility of a cultural reconstruction upon the ruins this Reich created."[2]

Even though he never worked on the German atomic-bomb project, Max von Laue was interned immediately after the war in England in a house named Farm Hall. Von Laue returned after his internment to a devastated Germany. Everywhere there were severe shortages of food, clothing and shelter. German children begged for food while their parents rummaged through garbage for whatever food they could find. Von Laue wrote in 1946 to his son Theodore at Princeton: "[The Germans] are immeasurably depressed. The complete suffering of war makes itself felt only now."[3]

Max von Laue also soon became disillusioned with the Allied denazification program. Von Laue wrote to his son: "More 'denazification' is going on here. My colleagues and I are now supposed to fill out our fourth questionnaire, a monster of 12 pages and with 133 questions! We declared that we are refusing to fill it out. The thing is beginning to get humiliating."[4] Von Laue also angrily complained to his son that denazification as practiced by the Americans in particular made "every use of reason impossible."[5]

As a courageous anti-Nazi, von Laue was frequently called upon to defend German scientists after the war. Niels Bohr, the great Danish physicist, wrote to Otto Hahn in 1946 suggesting that German scientists should publicly apologize for the treatment of scientists in countries occupied by Nazi Germany. Max von Laue responded by writing:

I hardly believe that the Germans coming into consideration would find themselves ready to do so. In any event, I am against it. Such self-evidences are not said so specifically, least of all in formal declaration. If our colleagues abroad would like to hear such declarations, documenting a distancing from the spirit of the Third Reich, they only need to take a look at the speeches that the presidents at German universities delivered at the inauguration of the new semester…[6]

Von Laue also defended the motives of German scientists who had worked on the German atomic-bomb project during the war. In a review of Samuel Goudsmit's book *Alsos*, American physicist Philip Morrison stated that the Germans "worked for the cause of Himmler and Auschwitz, for the burners of books and the takers of hostages. The community of science will be long delayed in welcoming the armourers of the Nazis, even if their work was not successful." Von Laue wrote in reply that it was a "monstrous suggestion" that German scientists as a body worked for Himmler and Auschwitz. Von Laue also said he doubted whether Goudsmit could ever write objectively about the German atomic-bomb program.[7]

Otto Hahn

German chemist Otto Hahn was also strongly anti-Nazi. Hahn and nine other German scientists were interned in England for six months after the war in Farm Hall. On November 16, 1945, the Swedish Royal Academy announced that the Nobel Prize in Chemistry for 1944 would be given to Otto Hahn for his discovery of fission.[8]

On November 10, 1946, shortly before Hahn's departure for Sweden to receive his Nobel Prize, Hahn stated to a Swiss visitor:

You see, I had hoped for years for the time when we would be rid of the heavy mental burden of National Socialism, and how much I looked forward to being able to work freely and without hindrance. But now I am sitting here, a head without a body; I am not allowed to return to my institute because it lies in the French Zone, and I have little idea about the other institutes, and here come new people every

day wanting a job or a political exonerating certificate or whatever else. I simply cannot help these people. Formerly, I really used to be a cheerful person and was actually never pessimistic, but if people just come with demands and one can hardly move for all the restrictions, I simply cannot go on. And imagine, ludicrous though it may sound, at the moment I don't even have a sound pair of shoes to put on. So, what use is it to me if the Nobel Prize is waiting for me in Sweden, which I am not allowed to pick up because I don't get a travel permit and meanwhile, I submit one application after the next for months on end in vain for a pair of shoe soles? If they would at least send me a pair of shoe soles against the Nobel Prize account, then I wouldn't have to walk around with wet feet all the time.[9]

Otto Hahn was initially favorably disposed to the denazification process. However, by 1947 he had changed his mind. Hahn stated that German scientists "profoundly regret how the 'denazification' is flipping into its obverse through the many measures, pushing true peace further and further away." Hahn also criticized the blatant lack of equal treatment resulting from regional variations and the many alterations to the guidelines of the denazification process.[10]

Otto Hahn also wrote bitterly about the exiles of German scientists to foreign countries:

Most of the older professors leave Germany very unwillingly, because they feel that their place is here. Necessity compels them, because their livelihoods and working opportunities in their country are taken away from them or else they are left in a constant state of fear of such an occurrence. All this, after our having experienced well enough what it means to replace competence with "politically irreproachable" dilettantes. But more depresses these men: the awareness that it is evidently not a matter of an honorable appointment to an independent research institution or university of some rank but (at least according to the American press) forms a part of the "reparations." Centuries ago, princes sent their countrymen away as plantation workers or soldiers. Today, scientists are exported.[11]

Bitterness is a word that appears frequently in the writings of German scientists after the war. Otto Hahn wrote in 1949: "It is certainly understandable that the factory dismantlings still taking place four years after the capitulation are being greeted with bitterness, particularly among the academic youth."[12]

Werner Heisenberg

Werner Heisenberg was one of the world's leading physicists before World War II. Heisenberg was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics for 1932, and he received several job offers from American universities in the summer of 1939. Despite his aversion to National Socialism and Adolf Hitler, Heisenberg decided to stay in Germany to help train Germany's young physicists.[13]

Heisenberg had exuded an air of delighted confidence and appetite for intellectual combat before World War II. Arnold Sommerfeld, his professor at Munich, called him healthy, eager, full of hope, uncomplicated. Wolfgang Pauli before the war called Heisenberg a Boy Scout. Heisenberg was completely changed after the war. Physicist Victor Weisskopf wrote in his memoirs, "I saw Heisenberg after the war and he was completely changed from the man I had known…He visibly carried a load."[14] Several of Heisenberg's colleagues after the war also observed that he seemed to suffer from a perpetual depression.[15]

Heisenberg suffered from his failure to explain his involvement in Germany's atomic-bomb program to his former friends. When Heisenberg met with Niels Bohr in August 1947, the two could not agree on

even basic points of their last discussion in September 1941. Heisenberg had hoped in 1941 that he could obtain Bohr's help in reaching an agreement among physicists not to build an atomic bomb during the war. Bohr had not wanted to pursue Heisenberg's suggestion, and apparently did not trust Heisenberg's motives. Germany had driven many of its leading scientists into exile before the war, and it seemed to Bohr that Heisenberg was seeking to negate this Allied advantage in the development of atomic bombs.

Although they had been the closest of friends, Bohr and Heisenberg were unable to communicate effectively either in September 1941 or in August 1947. After a while the two great physicists felt it would be better to stop disturbing the spirits of the past. Their close friendship had been shattered.[16]

An important point to make concerning Heisenberg's meeting with Bohr in September 1941 is that Heisenberg had no official authority to tell Bohr anything about the German atomic-bomb project. Heisenberg had committed an act of treason by attempting to obtain an international agreement among physicists not to build an atomic bomb during the war.[17] Heisenberg had courageously risked his life in their meeting.

Heisenberg did not fare any better with his former friend Samuel Goudsmit. Goudsmit had written a book entitled *Alsos* that was highly critical of the German atomic-bomb program. Heisenberg patiently tried to explain the factual misstatements in *Alsos*. Goudsmit grudgingly conceded some mistakes he had made in his book, but was infuriated by Heisenberg's claim of "a sense of decency" and his insistence that a "moral decision" was involved in the question of whether German scientists would build a bomb for Germany.[18]

The remarkable thing about *Alsos* is that Goudsmit claimed to see documentation that his parents had died in a German gas chamber. Goudsmit wrote: "The world has always admired the Germans for their orderliness. They are so systematic; they have such a sense of correctness. That is why they kept such precise records of their evil deeds, which we later found in their proper files in Germany. And that is why I know the precise date my father and my blind mother were put to death in the gas chamber. It was my father's 70th birthday."[19]

Since Goudsmit spoke fluent German and no documentation concerning German gas chambers has ever been found, Goudsmit is certainly lying about seeing records that his parents were put to death in a German gas chamber. Yet Goudsmit hypocritically questioned the morality of the German scientists who worked on the atomic bomb. In his last letter to Heisenberg in June 1949, Goudsmit wrote he was ending their discussions because "I am afraid that we might lose our tempers."[20]

The subject of the German atomic-bomb program continued to remain touchy. In the fall of 1949, Heisenberg made his first trip to the United States in over 10 years. Victor Weisskopf, who was then teaching at MIT, held a reception for Heisenberg in Weisskopf's home. Approximately half of the guests Weisskopf had invited failed to appear at the reception. They all gave Weisskopf similar explanations for staying away; they didn't want to shake the hand of a man who had tried to build an atomic bomb for Hitler.[21]

The cold reception continued for years. In the early 1950s, Heisenberg's wife Elisabeth sat next to James Franck at a physics conference on Lake Como in Italy. Elisabeth Heisenberg told Franck that she and Werner felt terribly isolated; people treated them coldly and blamed them for things they hadn't

done. Franck unsympathetically replied: “This is the way we Jews were always treated—now the Germans must live with it.”[22]

Even Heisenberg’s appetite for competition became weakened by years of postwar humiliation. In a film made in 1965, for example, Heisenberg conceded a discussion point to Paul Dirac which before the war he would have contested vigorously. [23]

Conclusion

German scientists were not allowed freedom of speech after World War II. The physicists released from Farm Hall were told what they were allowed to say in public and initially were allowed only to reside within the British Zone. One scientist wrote to physicist Walther Gerlach: “People are all so timid, perhaps justifiably so, for one can’t speak one’s mind as freely now anymore as during the Third Reich.”[24]

German scientists were also filled with bitterness and cynicism after the war. The Allied denazification program was especially unpopular. One German wrote in his diary: “These mindless dismissals of all former Nazis could drive one to desperation. The method only shows that the Americans are no smarter than their predecessors, the Nazis. What did a reasonable man say to me yesterday? From a mild dictatorship with its faults we have now arrived at a severe dictatorship.”[25]

Ultimately, even anti-Nazi German scientists regarded the Allied postwar occupation of Germany as merely a substitution of one hated system of restrictions with another.[26] The Allied denazification program, the forced transfer of German scientists to other countries, the restrictions on speech, and the poverty and starvation in postwar Germany created bitterness and depression among even the most anti-Nazi German scientists.

ENDNOTES

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[1] Beyerchen, Alan D., *Scientists under Hitler: Politics and the Physics Community in the Third Reich*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979, pp. 64-65.

[2] *Ibid*., p. 65.

[3] Cassidy, David C., *Beyond Uncertainty: Heisenberg, Quantum Physics, and the Bomb*, New York: Bellevue Literary Press, 2010, p. 390.

[4] Hentschel, Klaus, *The Mental Aftermath: The Mentality of German Physicists, 1945-1949*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 105.

[5] Cassidy, David C., *op. cit.*, p. 395.

[6] Hentschel, Klaus, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

[7] Powers, Thomas, *Heisenberg’s War: The Secret History of the German Bomb*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993, p. 457.

[8] Bernstein, Jeremy, *Hitler's Uranium Club: The Secret Recordings at Farm Hall,* 2nd edition, New York: Copernicus Books, 2001, p. 281.

[9] Hentschel, Klaus, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

[10] *Ibid*., p. 53.

[11] *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.

[12] *Ibid*., p. 81.

[13] Powers, Thomas, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-12.

[14] *Ibid*., pp. 460-461.

[15] Cassidy, David C., *op. cit.*, p. 394.

[16] Powers, Thomas, *op. cit.*, pp. 454-455.

[17] *Ibid*., p. 511.

[18] *Ibid*., pp. 455-457.

[19] Goudsmit, Samuel A., *Alsos*, Los Angeles and San Francisco: Tomash Publishers, 1986, pp. 48-49.

[20] Powers, Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 470.

[21] *Ibid*.

[22] *Ibid*., p. 458.

[23] Farmelo, Graham, *The Strangest Man: The Hidden Life of Paul Dirac, Mystic of the Atom*, New York: Basic Books, 2009, pp. 377-378. Farmelo recounted a 1965 exchange filmed in a 1965 feature of the BBC2's then-new *Horizon* science series between Dirac and Heisenberg in which Heisenberg waffled in response to a scientific/esthetic question that Farmelo felt Heisenberg would have contested vigorously before enduring his life-sapping experiences after the war.

[24] Hentschel, Klaus, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-43.

[25] *Ibid*., pp. 44-45.

[26] *Ibid*., p. 64.

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